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US light on British spy secrets

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THE classical porticos of the American National Archives in Washington DC seem a most unlikely haven for documents embarrassing to the British Government. Yet papers recently made public there not only challenge Whitehall's fiction that our Secret Service disappeared magically in 1945—there has never been an official admission even of its existence; Ministers refuse to answer questions about it in the Commons. They also give details of its activities in the period immediately following the Second World War.

The papers provide the first official, documentary evidence of co-operation between the CIA and our intelligence services, including plans for global covert operations in the event of another war.

During the war close links were forged between the American intelligence agency, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and the British. In May 1946, a year after it ended, Commodore Tully Shelley of American naval intelligence prepared some 'Notes on Intelligence in the UK.'

After noting the 'most cordial relations' the Americans already enjoyed with MI5 and MI6, Shelley gave details of Britain's new Joint Intelligence Bureau. Later that year its director, Sir Kenneth Strong, visited Washington and held extended talks with General Eisenhower on British plans for co-operation with the Americans.

In 1947 Britain and the US agreed to monitor the world together for the electronic, coded signals sent by other nations. These signals were at the heart of last year's secrets trial at the Old Bailey and are still regularly exchanged with the US. The activities of the organisations involved—the British Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham and the American National Security Agency—are hermetically sealed by tight security.

Such secrecy makes one document in the National Archives particularly interesting. It is a top secret memorandum of February 1953, telling the saga of how the Americans developed a cipher machine called the AFSAM 7 incorporating a new principle, ADONIS. The memorandum makes clear that by the mid-fifties the immense encoding wizardry of the British intelligence services—demonstrated most clearly by cracking the Enigma cipher in the War—had been overshadowed by American technical advances.

At the same time intelligence estimates were regularly passing to and fro over the Atlantic. A former deputy director of the CIA, Ray Cline, has publicly confirmed this exchange, and now the State Department has released documents highlighting a major row between Britain's Joint Intelligence Bureau and the CIA in 1950 over these estimates.

Minutes of a meeting in 1950 between Sir Oliver Franks, the British Ambassador in Washington, and the Bradley, show that the British Secret Service was less obsessed by the Soviet threat than the CIA. MI6 felt the Russians would not start a general war before 1955, their opposite numbers in Washington thought the date might be 1952 or earlier. The differences were only narrowed after a heated Joint Intelligence Conference.

More top secret papers demonstrate how the British Secret Service and the CIA worked at plans for covert operations in the event of war with Russia.

Early in 1950 the CIA proposed that there should be widespread co-operation between the intelligence agencies of non-Communist countries. In December General Sinclair of MI6 arrived in Washington to present the British view of these plans to the CIA. He expressed disquiet about the plans to widen the co-operation—that could mean that the British Secret Service would have had to receive instructions from a steering committee 'probably including French and Turkish members, in which event there are implications on which the British Secret Service is not prepared to commit itself.' The British much preferred arrangements made directly with the CIA and they finally triumphed in the bureaucratic struggle.

If the plans against the Russians remained plans, other schemes were put into operation. The CIA and British collaborated in a covert operation to topple Hoxha, the pro-Soviet ruler of Albania, in the early 1950s. British involvement became known because Kim Philby betrayed the émigrés landing on the Albanian beaches to the Russians.

Again, Tom Braden, head of the CIA's International Organisations Division 1951-4, has confirmed in a conversation with me that the British were involved in the 1953 Iranian coup, engineered by the CIA, which restored the Shah to the throne. He has also talked of the British running a whole string of other covert operations in the 1950s, including an expensive one to assist European unity. And according to another ex CIA agent, the celebrated U-2 spy plane was first stationed at Lakenheath in Suffolk in the summer of 1952. The RAF co-operated with the CIA and a number of its pilots flew the aircraft over Russia.

The relationship was not always trustful. The British were—and are—envious of the massive funds at the Americans' disposal.

The release of the American papers give tantalising insights into the covert associations and activities of our Secret Service in the 1950s. And the documents make a mockery of the British practice of excluding documents relating to Intelligence operations from the rule making official papers public after 30 years.

The Wilson Committee was established last year to examine public records policy. Shamefully the 30-year-rule was not included in the Committee's terms of reference. In America official documents have been released much before their thirtieth birthday, through departmental declassification rules or the Freedom of Information Act, with fruitful results for scholars—and the public.